

Chapter IV

In the venerable suburb - it was a suburb once - of Clerkenwell, towards that part of its confines which is nearest to the Charter House, and in one of those cool, shady Streets, of which a few, widely scattered and dispersed, yet remain in such old parts of the metropolis, - each tenement quietly vegetating like an ancient citizen who long ago retired from business, and dozing on in its infirmity until in course of time it tumbles down, and is replaced by some extravagant young heir, flaunting in stucco and ornamental work, and all the vanities of modern days, - in this quarter, and in a street of this description, the business of the present chapter lies.

At the time of which it treats, though only six-and-sixty years ago, a very large part of what is London now had no existence. Even in the brains of the wildest speculators, there had sprung up no long rows of streets connecting Highgate with Whitechapel, no assemblages of palaces in the swampy levels, nor little cities in the open fields. Although this part of town was then, as now, parcelled out in streets, and plentifully peopled, it wore a different aspect. There were gardens to many of the houses, and trees by the pavement side; with an air of freshness breathing up and down, which in these days would be sought in vain. Fields were nigh at hand, through which the New River took its winding course, and where there was merry haymaking in the summer time. Nature was not so far removed, or hard to get at, as in these days; and although there were busy trades in Clerkenwell, and working jewellers by scores, it was a purer place, with farm-houses nearer to it than many modern Londoners would readily believe, and lovers' walks at no great distance, which turned into squalid courts, long before the lovers of this age were born, or, as the phrase goes, thought of.

In one of these streets, the cleanest of them all, and on the shady side of the way - for good housewives know that sunlight damages their cherished furniture, and so choose the shade rather than its intrusive glare - there stood the house with which we have to deal. It was a modest building, not very straight, not large, not tall; not bold-faced, with great staring windows, but a shy, blinking house, with a conical roof going up into a peak over its garret window of four small panes of glass, like a cocked hat on the head of an elderly gentleman with one eye. It was not built of brick or lofty stone, but of wood and plaster; it was not planned with a dull and wearisome regard to regularity, for no one window matched the other, or seemed to have the slightest reference to anything besides itself.

The shop - for it had a shop - was, with reference to the first floor, where shops usually are; and there all resemblance between it and any other shop stopped short and ceased. People who went in and out

didn't go up a flight of steps to it, or walk easily in upon a level with the street, but dived down three steep stairs, as into a cellar. Its floor was paved with stone and brick, as that of any other cellar might be; and in lieu of window framed and glazed it had a great black wooden flap or shutter, nearly breast high from the ground, which turned back in the day-time, admitting as much cold air as light, and very often more. Behind this shop was a wainscoted parlour, looking first into a paved yard, and beyond that again into a little terrace garden, raised some feet above it. Any stranger would have supposed that this wainscoted parlour, saving for the door of communication by which he had entered, was cut off and detached from all the world; and indeed most strangers on their first entrance were observed to grow extremely thoughtful, as weighing and pondering in their minds whether the upper rooms were only approachable by ladders from without; never suspecting that two of the most unassuming and unlikely doors in existence, which the most ingenious mechanic on earth must of necessity have supposed to be the doors of closets, opened out of this room - each without the smallest preparation, or so much as a quarter of an inch of passage - upon two dark winding flights of stairs, the one upward, the other downward, which were the sole means of communication between that chamber and the other portions of the house.

With all these oddities, there was not a neater, more scrupulously tidy, or more punctiliously ordered house, in Clerkenwell, in London, in all England. There were not cleaner windows, or whiter floors, or brighter Stoves, or more highly shining articles of furniture in old mahogany; there was not more rubbing, scrubbing, burnishing and polishing, in the whole street put together. Nor was this excellence attained without some cost and trouble and great expenditure of voice, as the neighbours were frequently reminded when the good lady of the house overlooked and assisted in its being put to rights on cleaning days - which were usually from Monday morning till Saturday night, both days inclusive.

Leaning against the door-post of this, his dwelling, the locksmith stood early on the morning after he had met with the wounded man, gazing disconsolately at a great wooden emblem of a key, painted in vivid yellow to resemble gold, which dangled from the house-front, and swung to and fro with a mournful creaking noise, as if complaining that it had nothing to unlock. Sometimes, he looked over his shoulder into the shop, which was so dark and dingy with numerous tokens of his trade, and so blackened by the smoke of a little forge, near which his 'prentice was at work, that it would have been difficult for one unused to such espials to have distinguished anything but various tools of uncouth make and shape, great bunches of rusty keys, fragments of iron, half-finished locks, and such like things, which garnished the walls and hung in clusters from the ceiling.

After a long and patient contemplation of the golden key, and many such backward glances, Gabriel stepped into the road, and stole a look at the upper windows. One of them chanced to be thrown open at the moment, and a roguish face met his; a face lighted up by the loveliest pair of sparkling eyes that ever locksmith looked upon; the face of a pretty, laughing, girl; dimpled and fresh, and healthful - the very impersonation of good-humour and blooming beauty.

'Hush!' she whispered, bending forward and pointing archly to the window underneath. 'Mother is still asleep.'

'Still, my dear,' returned the locksmith in the same tone. 'You talk as if she had been asleep all night, instead of little more than half an hour. But I'm very thankful. Sleep's a blessing - no doubt about it.' The last few words he muttered to himself.

'How cruel of you to keep us up so late this morning, and never tell us where you were, or send us word!' said the girl.

'Ah Dolly, Dolly!' returned the locksmith, shaking his head, and smiling, 'how cruel of you to run upstairs to bed! Come down to breakfast, madcap, and come down lightly, or you'll wake your mother. She must be tired, I am sure - I am.'

Keeping these latter words to himself, and returning his daughter's nod, he was passing into the workshop, with the smile she had awakened still beaming on his face, when he just caught sight of his 'prentice's brown paper cap ducking down to avoid observation, and shrinking from the window back to its former place, which the wearer no sooner reached than he began to hammer lustily.

'Listening again, Simon!' said Gabriel to himself. 'That's bad. What in the name of wonder does he expect the girl to say, that I always catch him listening when SHE speaks, and never at any other time! A bad habit, Sim, a sneaking, underhanded way. Ah! you may hammer, but you won't beat that out of me, if you work at it till your time's up!'

So saying, and shaking his head gravely, he re-entered the workshop, and confronted the subject of these remarks.

'There's enough of that just now,' said the locksmith. 'You needn't make any more of that confounded clatter. Breakfast's ready.'

'Sir,' said Sim, looking up with amazing politeness, and a peculiar little bow cut short off at the neck, 'I shall attend you immediately.'

'I suppose,' muttered Gabriel, 'that's out of the 'Prentice's Garland or the 'Prentice's Delight, or the 'Prentice's Warbler, or the Prentice's

Guide to the Gallows, or some such improving textbook. Now he's going to beautify himself - here's a precious locksmith!

Quite unconscious that his master was looking on from the dark corner by the parlour door, Sim threw off the paper cap, sprang from his seat, and in two extraordinary steps, something between skating and minuet dancing, bounded to a washing place at the other end of the shop, and there removed from his face and hands all traces of his previous work - practising the same step all the time with the utmost gravity. This done, he drew from some concealed place a little scrap of looking-glass, and with its assistance arranged his hair, and ascertained the exact state of a little carbuncle on his nose. Having now completed his toilet, he placed the fragment of mirror on a low bench, and looked over his shoulder at so much of his legs as could be reflected in that small compass, with the greatest possible complacency and satisfaction.

Sim, as he was called in the locksmith's family, or Mr Simon Tappertit, as he called himself, and required all men to style him out of doors, on holidays, and Sundays out, - was an old-fashioned, thin-faced, sleek-haired, sharp-nosed, small-eyed little fellow, very little more than five feet high, and thoroughly convinced in his own mind that he was above the middle size; rather tall, in fact, than otherwise. Of his figure, which was well enough formed, though somewhat of the leanest, he entertained the highest admiration; and with his legs, which, in knee-breeches, were perfect curiosities of littleness, he was enraptured to a degree amounting to enthusiasm. He also had some majestic, shadowy ideas, which had never been quite fathomed by his intimate friends, concerning the power of his eye. Indeed he had been known to go so far as to boast that he could utterly quell and subdue the haughtiest beauty by a simple process, which he termed 'eyeing her over;' but it must be added, that neither of this faculty, nor of the power he claimed to have, through the same gift, of vanquishing and heaving down dumb animals, even in a rabid state, had he ever furnished evidence which could be deemed quite satisfactory and conclusive.

It may be inferred from these premises, that in the small body of Mr Tappertit there was locked up an ambitious and aspiring soul. As certain liquors, confined in casks too cramped in their dimensions, will ferment, and fret, and chafe in their imprisonment, so the spiritual essence or soul of Mr Tappertit would sometimes fume within that precious cask, his body, until, with great foam and froth and splutter, it would force a vent, and carry all before it. It was his custom to remark, in reference to any one of these occasions, that his soul had got into his head; and in this novel kind of intoxication many scrapes and mishaps befell him, which he had frequently concealed with no small difficulty from his worthy master.

Sim Tappertit, among the other fancies upon which his before-mentioned soul was for ever feasting and regaling itself (and which fancies, like the liver of Prometheus, grew as they were fed upon), had a mighty notion of his order; and had been heard by the servant-maid openly expressing his regret that the 'prentices no longer carried clubs wherewith to mace the citizens: that was his strong expression. He was likewise reported to have said that in former times a stigma had been cast upon the body by the execution of George Barnwell, to which they should not have basely submitted, but should have demanded him of the legislature - temperately at first; then by an appeal to arms, if necessary - to be dealt with as they in their wisdom might think fit. These thoughts always led him to consider what a glorious engine the 'prentices might yet become if they had but a master spirit at their head; and then he would darkly, and to the terror of his hearers, hint at certain reckless fellows that he knew of, and at a certain Lion Heart ready to become their captain, who, once afoot, would make the Lord Mayor tremble on his throne.

In respect of dress and personal decoration, Sim Tappertit was no less of an adventurous and enterprising character. He had been seen, beyond dispute, to pull off ruffles of the finest quality at the corner of the street on Sunday nights, and to put them carefully in his pocket before returning home; and it was quite notorious that on all great holiday occasions it was his habit to exchange his plain steel knee-buckles for a pair of glittering paste, under cover of a friendly post, planted most conveniently in that same spot. Add to this that he was in years just twenty, in his looks much older, and in conceit at least two hundred; that he had no objection to be jested with, touching his admiration of his master's daughter; and had even, when called upon at a certain obscure tavern to pledge the lady whom he honoured with his love, toasted, with many winks and leers, a fair creature whose Christian name, he said, began with a D - ; - and as much is known of Sim Tappertit, who has by this time followed the locksmith in to breakfast, as is necessary to be known in making his acquaintance.

It was a substantial meal; for, over and above the ordinary tea equipage, the board creaked beneath the weight of a jolly round of beef, a ham of the first magnitude, and sundry towers of buttered Yorkshire cake, piled slice upon slice in most alluring order. There was also a goodly jug of well-browned clay, fashioned into the form of an old gentleman, not by any means unlike the locksmith, atop of whose bald head was a fine white froth answering to his wig, indicative, beyond dispute, of sparkling home-brewed ale. But, better far than fair home-brewed, or Yorkshire cake, or ham, or beef, or anything to eat or drink that earth or air or water can supply, there sat, presiding over all, the locksmith's rosy daughter, before whose dark eyes even beef grew insignificant, and malt became as nothing.

Fathers should never kiss their daughters when young men are by. It's too much. There are bounds to human endurance. So thought Sim Tappertit when Gabriel drew those rosy lips to his - those lips within Sim's reach from day to day, and yet so far off. He had a respect for his master, but he wished the Yorkshire cake might choke him.

'Father,' said the locksmith's daughter, when this salute was over, and they took their seats at table, 'what is this I hear about last night?'

'All true, my dear; true as the Gospel, Doll.'

'Young Mr Chester robbed, and lying wounded in the road, when you came up!'

'Ay - Mr Edward. And beside him, Barnaby, calling for help with all his might. It was well it happened as it did; for the road's a lonely one, the hour was late, and, the night being cold, and poor Barnaby even less sensible than usual from surprise and fright, the young gentleman might have met his death in a very short time.'

'I dread to think of it!' cried his daughter with a shudder. 'How did you know him?'

'Know him!' returned the locksmith. 'I didn't know him - how could I? I had never seen him, often as I had heard and spoken of him. I took him to Mrs Rudge's; and she no sooner saw him than the truth came out.'

'Miss Emma, father - If this news should reach her, enlarged upon as it is sure to be, she will go distracted.'

'Why, lookye there again, how a man suffers for being good-natured,' said the locksmith. 'Miss Emma was with her uncle at the masquerade at Carlisle House, where she had gone, as the people at the Warren told me, sorely against her will. What does your blockhead father when he and Mrs Rudge have laid their heads together, but goes there when he ought to be abed, makes interest with his friend the doorkeeper, slips him on a mask and domino, and mixes with the masquers.'

'And like himself to do so!' cried the girl, putting her fair arm round his neck, and giving him a most enthusiastic kiss.

'Like himself!' repeated Gabriel, affecting to grumble, but evidently delighted with the part he had taken, and with her praise. 'Very like himself - so your mother said. However, he mingled with the crowd, and prettily worried and badgered he was, I warrant you, with people squeaking, 'Don't you know me?' and 'I've found you out,' and all that

kind of nonsense in his ears. He might have wandered on till now, but in a little room there was a young lady who had taken off her mask, on account of the place being very warm, and was sitting there alone.'

'And that was she?' said his daughter hastily.

'And that was she,' replied the locksmith; 'and I no sooner whispered to her what the matter was - as softly, Doll, and with nearly as much art as you could have used yourself - than she gives a kind of scream and faints away.'

'What did you do - what happened next?' asked his daughter. 'Why, the masks came flocking round, with a general noise and hubbub, and I thought myself in luck to get clear off, that's all,' rejoined the locksmith. 'What happened when I reached home you may guess, if you didn't hear it. Ah! Well, it's a poor heart that never rejoices. - Put Toby this way, my dear.'

This Toby was the brown jug of which previous mention has been made. Applying his lips to the worthy old gentleman's benevolent forehead, the locksmith, who had all this time been ravaging among the eatables, kept them there so long, at the same time raising the vessel slowly in the air, that at length Toby stood on his head upon his nose, when he smacked his lips, and set him on the table again with fond reluctance.

Although Sim Tappertit had taken no share in this conversation, no part of it being addressed to him, he had not been wanting in such silent manifestations of astonishment, as he deemed most compatible with the favourable display of his eyes. Regarding the pause which now ensued, as a particularly advantageous opportunity for doing great execution with them upon the locksmith's daughter (who he had no doubt was looking at him in mute admiration), he began to screw and twist his face, and especially those features, into such extraordinary, hideous, and unparalleled contortions, that Gabriel, who happened to look towards him, was stricken with amazement.

'Why, what the devil's the matter with the lad?' cried the locksmith. 'Is he choking?'

'Who?' demanded Sim, with some disdain.

'Who? Why, you,' returned his master. 'What do you mean by making those horrible faces over your breakfast?'

'Faces are matters of taste, sir,' said Mr Tappertit, rather discomfited; not the less so because he saw the locksmith's daughter smiling.

'Sim,' rejoined Gabriel, laughing heartily. 'Don't be a fool, for I'd rather see you in your senses. These young fellows,' he added, turning to his daughter, 'are always committing some folly or another. There was a quarrel between Joe Willet and old John last night though I can't say Joe was much in fault either. He'll be missing one of these mornings, and will have gone away upon some wild-goose errand, seeking his fortune. - Why, what's the matter, Doll? YOU are making faces now. The girls are as bad as the boys every bit!'

'It's the tea,' said Dolly, turning alternately very red and very white, which is no doubt the effect of a slight scald - 'so very hot.'

Mr Tappertit looked immensely big at a quartern loaf on the table, and breathed hard.

'Is that all?' returned the locksmith. 'Put some more milk in it. - Yes, I am sorry for Joe, because he is a likely young fellow, and gains upon one every time one sees him. But he'll start off, you'll find. Indeed he told me as much himself!'

'Indeed!' cried Dolly in a faint voice. 'In-deed!'

'Is the tea tickling your throat still, my dear?' said the locksmith.

But, before his daughter could make him any answer, she was taken with a troublesome cough, and it was such a very unpleasant cough, that, when she left off, the tears were starting in her bright eyes. The good-natured locksmith was still patting her on the back and applying such gentle restoratives, when a message arrived from Mrs Varden, making known to all whom it might concern, that she felt too much indisposed to rise after her great agitation and anxiety of the previous night; and therefore desired to be immediately accommodated with the little black teapot of strong mixed tea, a couple of rounds of buttered toast, a middling-sized dish of beef and ham cut thin, and the Protestant Manual in two volumes post octavo. Like some other ladies who in remote ages flourished upon this globe, Mrs Varden was most devout when most ill-tempered. Whenever she and her husband were at unusual variance, then the Protestant Manual was in high feather.

Knowing from experience what these requests portended, the triumvirate broke up; Dolly, to see the orders executed with all despatch; Gabriel, to some out-of-door work in his little chaise; and Sim, to his daily duty in the workshop, to which retreat he carried the big look, although the loaf remained behind.

Indeed the big look increased immensely, and when he had tied his apron on, became quite gigantic. It was not until he had several times walked up and down with folded arms, and the longest strides he

could take, and had kicked a great many small articles out of his way, that his lip began to curl. At length, a gloomy derision came upon his features, and he smiled; uttering meanwhile with supreme contempt the monosyllable 'Joe!'

'I eyed her over, while he talked about the fellow,' he said, 'and that was of course the reason of her being confused. Joe!'

He walked up and down again much quicker than before, and if possible with longer strides; sometimes stopping to take a glance at his legs, and sometimes to jerk out, and cast from him, another 'Joe!' In the course of a quarter of an hour or so he again assumed the paper cap and tried to work. No. It could not be done.

'I'll do nothing to-day,' said Mr Tappertit, dashing it down again, 'but grind. I'll grind up all the tools. Grinding will suit my present humour well. Joe!'

Whirr-r-r-r. The grindstone was soon in motion; the sparks were flying off in showers. This was the occupation for his heated spirit.

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r-r.

'Something will come of this!' said Mr Tappertit, pausing as if in triumph, and wiping his heated face upon his sleeve. 'Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore!'

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r.